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ABSTRACT

I am an American Indian, and I believe education to be something totally different from what the white man believes it to be, for he sees education as factories, roads, space travel, degrees, high salaries, and a means to be a good life. I cannot separate the white man's education from the political/military strategies practiced against my race (the treaties exemplify this). I hear that the most respected educational activity is research, but research has reduced Indian cultures to the level of quaint anthropological artifacts. Like Christianity, education has been used to convert Indians into white men. Our children have been taken out of their own cultural environment and made dependent upon a white culture which only gave them education of an elementary vocational type and promoted the welfare syndrome. The miracle is that Indians have withstood the invasion of such an alien and hostile force, but Indians are now developing their own school systems in Canada (six bands are going to have their own K-12 schools this year). As an Indian I believe education is not to be confined to the activities of a formal institution but should be a unified, integrated set of processes coming out of an individual's experience with the total environment, emphasizing character development, spiritual sensitivity, and contemporary knowledge for all who have the capacity/desire to understand. (Author/JC)

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INDIAN AND NORTHERN EDUCATION PROGRAM
UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN
SASKATOON, SASKATCHEWAN, CANADA

THE INDIAN AND EDUCATION

by

DAVID AHENAKEW

This address was presented by David Ahenakew, Chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians in the Indian and Northern Dialogue Series at the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, on October 17, 1974.

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The purpose of this monograph is to share information and ideas associated with Indian and northern education.

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am here today to talk about education, but I feel we are on the brink of a serious misunderstanding. I am an Indian, and I have a strong suspicion that education means something to me that is totally different from what it means to the white man. To you education is factories, roads, space travel, degrees, high salaries, and a means to a great and good life. That is not how I as an Indian see it. To me, your education is guns and the slaughter of the buffalo, the wiping out of a source of livelihood. Education to me is a trick of the devil so that we who owned the continent end up on reservations, and you become owners of the land. Reading and writing are not noble skills to me. I do not feel thrilled by them. As the Treaties were negotiated, my forefathers talked and the Queen's representatives wrote. How do we end up on the short end of the stick in the Treaties? Our people believed that they were signing agreements that would preserve the rights of cultural independence for future generations of Indians. They thought the Treaties would safeguard for us resources of the land to supply our needs forever. How do we end up in this situation then? Our elders suggest that writing and reading made all the difference.

I do not wish to be rude to you, but I must tell you the truth as I feel it in my guts. The white man's education, ladies and gentlemen, has worked against the Indian in the most vicious manner. I cannot separate your education from your political and military strategies that have been practised against my race. I cannot see the economic policies developed and implemented by the academic elite of the country as being

something isolated from the educational system. These economic policies are co-operating with the political system to keep my people perpetually poor and destitute. I also find the most distinguished products of the schools and the universities committing brutal and violent prejudice against Indians. I hear that the most respected activity in the educational system is research. Yet we find that the valued art of research had done nothing but harm to the Indian. It has reduced the Indian religion, customs, traditions, and our civilization to the level of quaint artifacts. Universities are producing research papers and doctoral dissertations by studying our culture and lifestyle as if they were relics from an ancient and dead strain of humanity. There are only passing, casual references to Indians in books used in schools. Until a few years ago, these books talked of Indians quite openly as being savages. Now authors and publishers are becoming a little sensitive. However, I can say without hesitation that white writers of school textbooks are making absolutely no effort to represent Indian civilization of the past as the original and pervading force on this continent. Nor do they present Indians as a living force in modern Canadian society.

The educational system has generally functioned to humiliate Indian students. Educational and psychological research has proved that Indians are inferior in intelligence. It has also proved that the Indians do not qualify as having a proper and healthy personality. My language, Cree, has been voted by the humanities department of your university as not deserving the status of a language. That is why Cree is taught by the Department of Anthropology, as if it were an abnormal phenomenon. In fact, according to the terms of reference of your educational system I do not exist as a human being. I am merely a subject

for study. In your educational scheme, I have no identity as an Indian.

Education like Christianity has been used as an instrument for converting Indians into white men. No matter how ill-witted and clumsy officials from the European immigrant population might have been, they never lacked in missionary zeal when dealing with us. Very determinedly and persistently they viewed education as a tool for driving the Indian out of the Indian. If I may be allowed a little freedom to do some anthropology on white people, I would say that the strong desire to convert Indians into white is the result of one outstanding characteristic. White people seem to have an absolute urge to conquer and subdue everything. When they look at a mountain, a river, the moon, and the stars, they have one thing on their minds. Subdue them. If in the process they have to bugger them up, pollute them out of existence, they will do it. When Europeans in this country saw Indians, they felt upset. Indians looked different, and talked differently. This they could not tolerate. We did not fit into the landscape of a country they had decided was theirs. In fact, they called in God and Christianity to do a little bit of helping there. No difficulty, because they had already converted God and Christianity into white. Therefore, I am not surprised that their church and God told white people categorically that this continent had been created for them. The Indians were here by mistake. So they went at us with the gun. However, things went wrong there. We just refused to die out. Then, they attacked the Indian with education. And we must admit you have accomplished more with education than with the gun. The objective is exactly the same: wipe the Indian

out of existence. With this policy in mind, the Government of Canada decided that they were going to make farmers out of us. Incidentally, white people on the prairies felt disturbed when this aspect of conversion began to work too well. It was found that Indians were making a success out of farming. They were using machinery and crop rotation effectively and getting good results. God, the Indians were competing with the white people! Indian Affairs quickly remedied the matter by preventing the use of farm machinery by Indians. We were told to use hand tools and oxen. Deliberately outlined policy of the Government was to convert us into an imitation of the peasants of eastern Europe. Henceforth, Indian farmers were supplied with the following: two acres of crop, a cow or two, and manual implements consisting of a hoe, rake, cradle, sickle, and flail.

I am sorry for this diversion, but the plan was to make farmers out of us, I should say, east European peasant farmers. Further, in this policy of extinguishing our unwanted culture, the government set up residential schools. Children were taken from the influence of parents and the general community. It was hoped that if they were separated from their cultural environment all through the growing years, there was better chance of molding them in the image of the European Canadian. No Indians were trained as teachers because if Indians taught Indian children, the purpose of this scheme might have been lost.

Another important point should be remembered. The aim of education was to convert us into cultural whites, but whites of a special variety. Therefore, schooling designed for us was of an elementary vocational type. Having failed to kill the Indian with the gun, white

society is attempting to do the same with education. It is not at all difficult for me to see that it is this kind of education that is destroying the identity of the Indian. It is taking away from him pride in his history and culture. It has taken away from him his sense of self-worth and for the last hundred years the Indian has been educated into being helpless and dependent.

The surprising thing is not that there is so much unemployment and alcoholism among Indians. The miracle is that Indians have withstood the invasion of an alien and hostile social force so well. Actually, I wish to suggest to white society to grasp reality. They should do so in the interest of their own peace and security. I would recommend to you to recognize that all the ploys and tricks of education have not quite succeeded in their purpose. Your research may have negated my existence to your satisfaction, but that is not enough. I am here. The Indian has not disappeared. He would be recognized on his own terms. He never ceased to be an Indian, and he feels an inexorable kinship to his civilization and race, as you do to yours. The difference is that today the Indian is coming of age in your system as well. Look at the signs and you will see that today we have decided to take charge of our own destiny. For a hundred years we have resisted your system passively. It is true we have suffered. White society has perpetrated poverty and misery upon us. It has destroyed generations of children while parents stood helpless. It has humiliated and shamed parents and respected elders while children felt confused and frightened. However, the time has come when we are working actively to assert our spiritual and cultural autonomy. We will mold our environment and

lives to realize our aspirations and do so in accord with the social and cultural forces of our civilization. This is as true in education as anywhere else. Twenty years ago, federal and provincial governments concocted a plot to advance to the next stage of assimilation. They decided to eliminate federal schools on the reserves and to integrate our children into provincial schools. In the last two years, we have changed that situation. We are not resisting any plans and schemes. We are going to do things the way we see them right. Therefore, Indians on a number of reserves are developing their own educational system, and setting up their own schools. When we started the process, bureaucrats came with their usual objections: we were too late in the fiscal year, agreements had been signed with provincial school boards, teachers would not be available, and how could we know the way to run schools? Our people stuck to their plans. Six bands are going to have their own schools this year - from kindergarten to grade XII.

I am, however, going ahead of myself. I feel the obligation of defining to you what I as an Indian expect from education. For me, education is not confined to the activities of a formal institution. It is a unified, integrated set of processes that an individual experiences in his environment. By a set of unified and integrated processes, I mean that the influences providing education come from the total environment, and the influences also work together in co-operation. It is not merely schools and universities that have the responsibility for giving education, and it is not just teachers and professors who have to exercise the educational function. All parts of the environment make their unique contribution. The elder may make

the young spiritually sensitive so that he is capable of receiving instruction from the non-human aspect of his surroundings. The parent may help develop the right attitude so that the young can benefit from the wisdom of the elder and the instruction of teachers. The teacher may reinforce the spiritual and character building efforts of the others by enabling the students to acquire the most appropriate approaches to knowledge. The Indian educational experience is a total environmental experience. It is a co-ordinated effort in the development of character, objective knowledge, and spiritual sensitivity.

I ought to emphasize that to the Indian an active and strong link with his past is extremely important. For this reason, our older people are a vital part of society. We regard them with respect because they are a means of relating with the accumulated wisdom of the ages. Through tradition, our elders are expected to be less attentive to the material aspects of life. Personal needs are not a passionate preoccupation. The elders are experienced and they have the time to ponder over the history of their people, and to have mature judgment over action. Above all, they develop a selfless interest in the well-being of the young in the community. Elders have a special place in the educational system of the Indian. Perhaps this is so because the Indian have always cared for that part of training which does not concern itself with the acquisition of knowledge. To me, as an Indian and a leader of Saskatchewan Indians, this is of the utmost significance. I feel sad at the change that has come in the attitudes and values of the young in Indian society. I feel sad and angry at the young when I see them acting helpless and dependent, when they do not stand up with pride, when they do not have the convictions of a good moral character as was true for our

people in the past. Many of our young are becoming selfish through laziness; they plead for sympathy mouthing the jargon of the white man's psychology. For such in my community I have no excuse, and I offer no alibis for them. It is my personal conviction that no matter what the odds, no matter how unfair the society in which you live, a man must have the strength of character to live a useful life. The white man may have devised the welfare system out of compassion and charity. But as an Indian, I know that welfare is an insidious disease that is eating away at the moral fibre of my race.

However, I must point out that the disappointing and unhappy aspects of Indian life are also the result of an education that departed from Indian tradition. The white man's education relegated the Indian to elementary vocational training and had no place for the development of character. We wish to make amends. We will place the elders in their rightful place as character builders and I must remind you that this aspect in the Indian education was a subtle and delicate process. There was no autocratic regimentation, and handing down of a correct code of ethics or behaviour. In fact, the reason this part of development in the young was left to elders was so that it may have no contamination from physical force and intimidation. It was a form of gradual growth, and the elders assisted in it by enhancing a comprehensive awareness of the social and physical factors of the environment. This type of education gave the Indians in the past a strong self-reliance as well as a social conscience.

Many of you in the audience who know me personally will have a little difficulty in accepting my interest in the religious aspect of

education. My language in informal settings is not quite disciplined. And I do not spend very many Sundays in church. But I do believe that education must give the young an opportunity to develop a spiritual sensitivity, and I talk of the Indian type of religious system - though not necessarily the Indian religion. That must be a matter of personal choice. In the past our people were able to form a relationship with unseen forces both in the human body and in the world around. This relationship gave our people the power to face the good and bad in life with dignity. It caused them to treat each other with fairness and compassion, and it certainly gave them the power to see something in the world around so that they did not commit the kind of insane destruction that is being carried out today. Whatever the basis for the spiritual and the religious, if this element in one's development can bring about such social and ecological benefits, it is worth developing.

Finally, the educational process must blend with the character and spiritual aspects, training in contemporary knowledge. It is my firm belief that knowledge is not cultural or racial. There is no part of mathematics or physics or medicine that is designated as German, British, or Indian. Knowledge belongs to those who have the capacity to understand it and to benefit from it. We want our young to have the freedom and opportunity to pursue studies in the various fields according to their ability and interest. To the white people this may sound like a truism. However, Indians know that such freedom of choice has not been available to them. Schools and universities have been so designed and managed that they suit the convenience and needs of white people alone. The curriculum of elementary high schools is such that it does not stimulate the interest of our children. Academic content

and teaching style provide no contact with the non-school experience of the children. The English language is not taught to our children as a new form of verbal communication, but it is used as a device for proving that our children are somehow unfit for coping with education. White teachers believe that our children are mentally inferior and seem to succeed in effectively implanting that belief in our children. Schools have been controlled by outsiders, run by those who had neither faith in the academic ability of our children nor interest in their advancement.

Universities, of course, have behaved no better toward the Indian. I am particularly concerned with the University of Saskatchewan. As an institution of higher learning in the province, this place should have been interested in the education of Indians. However, from my experience in the last five years, I have found it to be a closed shop. It is dedicated to the benefit of Caucasians alone. You want Indians to come here on your terms, to study materials that satisfy your criteria, to show respect for your hocus-pocus. You have passed judgment on our languages, our music, dance forms, art, history, and religion. And you have decided to exclude them from your hallowed halls of learning. When we have come to you respectfully insisting that Indians be allowed to establish courses of education at university, we have encountered nothing less than sophisticated, academic bigotry. Some of your professors and deans have told us to go and form our own university; others want us to build courses that are structured according to the university criteria, in other words courses that perpetuate Caucasian culture, and thought style. And they look at us with shocked indignation that we do not present them with lists of professors who

have your degrees. This is the kind of rational power the academic elite of the white society display to us. And, of course, they naturally expect us to bring money to have classes taught here. G..d....it, we gave you the richest land in the world and we signed Treaties that guaranteed education to us in perpetuity. And now, you quibble with us over little fiscal rules that you made yourself. The university is demonstrating no flexibility of attitude, nor any initiative in attempting to fulfill its responsibility for providing education to Indians. In fact, the university is resisting the effort on our part to broaden its cultural and intellectual parameters. You have established a Committee on Native Studies, with not a single Saskatchewan Indian on it. That has to be a complete farce. For almost a year now, the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College has been asking the university for affiliation. All we get is committees, and meetings, and your usual arrogance.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that there is a new awakening among the Indians of this continent. They have decided to take control of their education and I have the feeling that this decision has strong implications for white society. Whether the implications will be pleasant or unpleasant I cannot forecast. That depends upon the response of your society. As far as we are concerned, we believe that the only kind of education that is good for us is the one we have a share in developing, and over which we have jurisdiction. This is not an unusual demand. After all, the white people do develop and plan the curriculum that their children study in schools. They do exercise authority over the running of their educational program.

This is precisely what we intend to do. We must also remind you that we have a right over the universities of this province. But we cannot benefit from those institutions as they exist today. In their present form they will take away from our students something that is precious: their cultural heritage and pride in race. That we are not prepared to surrender. Therefore, when we talk of Indian Control of Indian Education, we are talking about asserting our identity as a civilization - one that was different from yours, but certainly not inferior. It is only on the basis of that assertion that our young will have the strength of character to realize their potential. We think it is necessary that the universities in this province should ask for the contribution of the Indian people in renovating and refashioning the structure of education. From the information that I get, a great deal of what takes place in your classrooms and laboratories is not particularly relevant and many times not very honourable. Therefore, if university education is to become valid for Indians our people must be allowed a share in determining its nature and operation.

By the force of the Treaties signed between the Indian leaders and Government of Canada, we have a right to the universities. Therefore, the question is not whether the universities will allow us to use them for the education of our people but whether they will show fairness in allowing us to share in controlling the quality and nature of the university's operations. We are determined to have that share. In the end, I would like to quote from the Qu'Appelle Treaty which said: "The Queen wishes her red children to learn the cunning of the white man." However, we want to learn that cunning without destroying our own heritage.